

(July 4, 2006) OP firefighter fights for fair benefits through Gold Star Wives

printed: Wednesday Journal Online

By BRENDAN GOLDMAN Michelle Fitz-Henry, a 20-year veteran of the Armed Forces and an Oak Park firefighter, was well aware of the dangers her husband, Senior Petty Officer Theodore Fitz-Henry, faced as a Navy SEAL on combat duty. But that knowledge didn't prepare her for the accident, during nighttime Humvee combat training in Nevada, which took his life on June 15, 2004.

Fitz-Henry, a Forest Park resident, is grateful that her husband died on American soil doing something he loved. Speaking to his brother-in-law shortly before the accident, Fitz-Henry's husband told him that Humvee training is so much fun, "I can't believe I'm getting paid for doing this."

After her husband's accident, Fitz-Henry attended a Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS) conference that provided information on war-widow issues—from emotional support to finance and accounting benefits. Gold Star Wives, a grass roots organization for war widows, was among the groups represented at the conference, and a representative of the group later made contact with Fitz-Henry. The representative asked about her emotional and financial state. Fitz-Henry, who had gone into a state of shock and couldn't even drive in the immediate aftermath, appreciated her empathy. After their conversation, she decided to become a member of Gold Star Wives.

At first Fitz-Henry used the organization's online chatroom to speak to other widows. While many live near their husbands' military bases, Fitz-Henry chose to live in close proximity to her extended family in Chicago's suburbs, and was not even in contact with a local widows group. "You don't know that other people feel the same way," Fitz-Henry reflected "[You realize] you're not out of your mind."

As time passed, she decided to get more involved in the political component of the organization's agenda. "I'd never been involved with the legislative aspect of our government," she remarked. "Now I can basically tell you who [the representatives] are and where they stand on issues important to me."

Gold Star Wives has around 10,000 members, representing approximately one in every five war widows living in the nation. "The goal of the legislative committee of the organization is to maintain some equity with traditional survivor benefits of other federal programs," said Edith Smith, a self-labeled 56-year-old grandmother with the definitive accent of the deep South. She is one of two senior members of Gold Star Wives who spend the majority of their time lobbying Congress in Washington D.C. Smith's husband was wounded in the Vietnam War and ultimately succumbed to those wounds. "I think widows join Gold Star Wives for the camaraderie," she said, "a spirit of sisterhood that nobody else could offer."

Although the details of the legislation is complex, the main grievance for Gold Star Wives is that the military is neglecting its responsibility to take care of the widows of soldiers killed in military service-related deaths. "The employer of uniformed service members, namely the military, ought to be held to the same standards as other employers in the country," Smith said.

Currently, all widows are paid Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC), which is provided by the federal government, and supplemental payments from their deceased spouse's employer. In the military's case, this payment is the Survivor's Benefit Plan (SBP). However, currently the military is only providing DIC, plus the difference between DIC and SBP, instead of simply adding DIC and SBP, like other employers do—including the federal government.

Smith praised Fitz-Henry's activism, noting that though she is relatively new to the scene, she has already made a significant contribution to the group. Fitz-Henry contacted U.S. congressmen Daniel Lipinski (D-3rd) and Danny Davis (D-

7th), who represent, respectively, the areas where Fitz-Henry lives and works, and invited them to the group's May 25 reception, held on Capitol Hill. Both representatives came, two of the 12 congressmen who attended.

"They're both supportive of legislation," Smith said, "that will help widows maintain the standard of living that they had when their husbands were with them."

Fitz-Henry said that is why she chose to make her story public. "I'm here to let constituents know that [their representatives] are supportive of war widows and their families."